



Report Writing

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Today's topics

- ◆ Purpose and usage of reports
- ◆ Spelling, grammar, and structure
- ◆ Collecting, organizing, and presenting information



King Henry IV: Part I, Act III

GLENDOWER: I can call spirits from the
vasty deep.

HOTSPUR: Why, so can I, or so can any
man; But will they come when you do
call for them?

Anyone can write. But does the writing
achieve its desired purpose?



Don't write merely to be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood.

-Robert Louis Stevenson



What events should be “reported?”

- ◆ Inspections
- ◆ Interviews with subjects, witnesses, *etc.*
- ◆ Telephone conversations
- ◆ Photographs and sample collection
- ◆ Anything else you might need to remember 5 years later!
- ◆ Even “micro-reports” should document entire set of relevant facts.



The biggest problem with report-writing is:

Too many of us write the way we talk!



Levels of discourse

- ◆ Literary: maid, steed
- ◆ Common: girl, horse
- ◆ Illiterate: gal, hoss
- ◆ Slang: skirt, plug
- ◆ Technical: *homo sapiens, equus caballus*



When we write the way we talk:

“I drew my weapon, and when the suspect refused to drop his gun, fired three shots which struck him in the chest.”

becomes:

“I drew down on the perp and when he wouldn’t give up I capped him.”



Questions to ask before starting:

- ◆ Why am I writing this?
- ◆ What do I want to achieve?
- ◆ Who will read this?
- ◆ What does my reader want to know?
- ◆ How will this be used?
- ◆ When will this be used?



What is the purpose of a report?

- ◆ To communicate information to an audience
- ◆ To documents facts for evidentiary purposes



Who is your “audience?”

- ◆ Yourself?
- ◆ Your supervisor?
- ◆ General public?
- ◆ An attorney or prosecutor
- ◆ A jury?



Rule of thumb:

Every report should be written as if it were intended to be read by a jury and scrutinized by a defense attorney.



What does the reader want to know?

- ◆ Details not important to you might be crucial to a future investigation.
- ◆ Identities of persons involved are very important.



How will this be used?

- ◆ To direct an enforcement action
- ◆ To communicate information to the public
- ◆ To document facts for an enforcement action

OR

Possibly to impeach your court testimony!



When will this be used?

- ◆ In the immediate future, while memories are fresh.
- ◆ In the distant future, when memories are not!



Another rule of thumb:

Never, never rely solely on your memory to document an event. For most intents and purposes, if it's not in your report (or photo), it didn't happen.



Why is good report-writing crucial?

- ◆ Will result in more appropriate enforcement actions
- ◆ Will best facilitate your recall of information in the future
- ◆ May in fact *save you* from having to testify in court later!
- ◆ Will make you look more “professional” and *credible* if you do need to testify.



Why is good report-writing crucial?

- ◆ Learning to write good reports will lead to better information-gathering



Structure of a report

- ◆ Letters make words
- ◆ Words make phrases
- ◆ Phrases make sentences
- ◆ Sentences make paragraphs
- ◆ Paragraphs make documents



Letters make words

- ◆ Spelling is the most basic element of writing.
- ◆ If you don't do it well, you will appear less competent.
- ◆ Proofreading is crucial.
- ◆ When we read, we see words as whole units—this is one reason spelling errors are overlooked.



According to research at an English university, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that first and last letter is at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because we do not read every letter by itself but the word as a whole.



Do not rely on “Spellchecker”

I have a spelling checker
It came with my PC:
It plainly marks four my revue
Miss takes I cannot sea.
I've run this poem threw it
I'm shore your pleased to no;
It's letter perfect in it's weigh
My checker tolled me sew.



Poor spelling and punctuation will cause the reader to focus on flaws in your writing, not on the information being conveyed.



Words make phrases

- ◆ Word usage probably second-most important aspect of report writing.
- ◆ Words are the simplest grammatical constructs that convey an entire idea.
- ◆ Words have “denotative” and “connotative” meanings.
- ◆ One word can change the entire focus of a sentence or even paragraph.



Top Ten Errors in Word Usage

◆ 10: Moot *vs.* Mute

“The point being moot, he stood mutely in front of the judge.”

◆ 9: Assure *vs.* Insure *vs.* Ensure

◆ 8: Peak *vs.* Pique

Pique refers to an emotion – usually anger or curiosity. A “peak” is the highest point of something.



Top Ten Errors in Word Usage

- ◆ 7: Affect *vs.* Effect.
- ◆ 6: Except *vs.* Accept
- ◆ 5: Principal *vs.* Principle
- ◆ 4: Compliment *vs.* Complement
- ◆ 3: Lose *vs.* Loose
- ◆ 2: You're *vs.* your



Top Ten Errors in Word Usage

And the number one error in word usage is:

◆ It's *vs.* its



Misspelled or Misused?

“Get ahold of” (“Get hold of” is correct)

“Alot” vs. “a lot” (“A lot” is correct)

“Asterick” (“Asterisk” is correct)

“Cleanup” vs. “clean up” (“Cleanup” is a noun, “clean up” a verb)

“Fiscal vs.
“physical”



Misspelled or Misused?

“Ideal” vs. “idea”

“Maybe” vs. (“Maybe” is an
“may be” adverb)

“Point in time” (redundant)

“Pretty” vs.
“somewhat”

“Try and” do. . . (“Try to” do. . . is correct)



Misspelled or Misused?

“3 times smaller” (“1/3 as large” is correct)

“Center around” (“Center on” or “revolve around” is correct)

“Different than” (“Different from” is correct)

“Both” vs. “each” (“Each” is clearer if it can be used)



Misspelled or misused?

◆ “Could of”

◆ (“Could have” is correct)



Misspellings often result from mispronunciations:

- ◆ Prerogative
- ◆ Mischievous
- ◆ Grievous



Amount vs. Number

- ◆ “Amount” words relate to quantities of things measured in bulk
- ◆ “Number” words relate to things that can be counted.

Thus:



Amount vs. Number

- ◆ You can eat *fewer* cookies, but you drink *less* milk.
- ◆ If you eat too *many* cookies, you've had too *much* dessert.
- ◆ You don't eat *less* cookies, or too *much* cookies.
- ◆ “More” can be used either way: You can eat more cookies or drink more milk.



Rule of thumb:

Don't strive for verbosity or loquaciousness merely to portray eloquence for the purpose of creating a façade of competence or intelligence.

(Don't try to appear smart by using big words)



Many words have *two* meanings

- ◆ The “denotative” meaning is the literal, strict, “dictionary” definition.
- ◆ The “connotative” meaning includes the “emotional” aspect of the definition.
- ◆ You should always avoid “biased” language in report-writing.



Using bias-free language

- ◆ Avoid emotional terms, such as “amazing,” “tremendous,” *etc.*
- ◆ One word can change the entire tone of a letter or report.



Beware when abbreviating Latin!

- ◆ *E.g. (exempli gratia)*: for example
- ◆ *I.e. (id est)*: that is
- ◆ *Et al. (et alia)*: and so on (literally, “and other things”)
- ◆ *Etc. (et cetera)*: and so on
- ◆ Latin terms and abbreviations are usually italicized.
- ◆ Don't overuse them.



Phrases make sentences

- ◆ Punctuation within a sentence can be important to communicating ideas.
- ◆ Words should be arranged in a way that eliminates ambiguity.



Examples of Amphiboly

- ◆ “He told his brother that he had won the prize”
- ◆ “Feed a cold and starve a fever”
- ◆ “Filled with bad gas, he continued to drive his car despite the knocking.”
- ◆ Read things you write and try to think of ways they can be misinterpreted.



Phrases make sentences

- ◆ Punctuation within a sentence can be important to communicating ideas.
- ◆ Words should be arranged in a way that eliminates ambiguity.
- ◆ Use “parallel construction” in series or in compound/complex sentences



Parallel Construction

- ◆ The new inspector excelled at writing, mathematical calculations, and communicating with others.

is better written as:

- ◆ The new inspector excelled at writing, calculating mathematical equations, and communicating with others.



Parallel Construction

- ◆ I was glad to be departing for Europe but I was nervous when I left my apartment

is better written as:

- ◆ I was glad to be departing for Europe but nervous to be leaving my apartment



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Phrases make sentences

- ◆ Punctuation within a sentence can be important to communicating ideas.
- ◆ Words should be arranged in a way that eliminates ambiguity.
- ◆ Use “parallel construction” in series or in compound/complex sentences
- ◆ The passive mood should be avoided.
- ◆ Make sure the antecedents of pronouns are not ambiguous



Ambiguous antecedents

- ◆ The system change has improved customer service. This has resulted in fewer complaints from the public.
- ◆ Problems of the past caused changes in personnel, budgeting, and follow-up. As things turned out, they were probably timely.



#1 punctuation error?

- ◆ “Placing punctuation outside quotation marks”.



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POSSIBLE EXCEPTION:

When doing otherwise would create ambiguity.

Example:

Did John say, “the invoice is correct”?



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- ◆ “Placing punctuation outside quotation marks.”
- ◆ Dropping the final comma in a sequence, series or list.



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Sentences make paragraphs

- ◆ Sentences should be organized so communication flows well.
- ◆ Sentences should be punctuated properly.
- ◆ Sentences within a paragraph should all be related to the same topic.



Paragraphs make documents

- ◆ Paragraphs should be presented in some logical order.
- ◆ Good use of paragraph headings can better organize information.



Organizing paragraphs

- ◆ Sequentially
- ◆ Chronologically
- ◆ In order of topic importance



How will good structure help readers?

- ◆ Some readers may only want to read relevant sections
- ◆ Helps focus concentration on topic
- ◆ Good headings and sub-headings give reader overview of subject
- ◆ Assists in referring back to specific sections of report



How will good structure help you?

- ◆ Helps you decide where to present each fact or idea
- ◆ Helps you think more clearly about the subject
- ◆ Helps in writing the report—writing may begin at any “subtopic.”



Useful websites

- ◆ <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing>
- ◆ www.edufind.com/english/grammar/subidx.cfm
- ◆ www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors
- ◆ <http://www.mgt.ncsu.edu/studentinfo/careerserv/manual.html> (then scroll down to “Business Communication”)



Recommended Reading:

- ◆ The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric, by Sister Miriam Joseph *et al.*



Assembling a Top-Notch Report

- ◆ Plan, plan, plan
- ◆ Gather information
- ◆ Organize what you've gathered
- ◆ Construct your report
- ◆ Evaluate your report
- ◆ Re-write if necessary (it usually is!)



Planning Stage

- ◆ Planning your inspection or interview insures the best possible information being collected.
- ◆ Know the statutes and regulations involved.
- ◆ Planning an inspection should involve a thorough file review
- ◆ Some of a report can even be written before the inspection is conducted!



Collecting the Information

- ◆ Learn to take copious, detailed notes.
- ◆ Develop your own “shorthand.”
- ◆ You can never take too many notes.
- ◆ Record “exact quotes” as much as possible.
- ◆ Take your time.
- ◆ Photographs should be part of any inspection.
- ◆ Photo logs are important.



Constructing the Report

- ◆ ASAP!
- ◆ Begin report with an introduction



Things to Include in Introduction:

- ◆ Facility identification and location
- ◆ Reason for inspection
- ◆ Date, time, etc.
- ◆ Identification of all persons present during inspection
- ◆ Request and approval for entrance to facility



Constructing the Report

- ◆ ASAP!
- ◆ Begin report with an introduction
- ◆ Should reports be written in 1st person or 3rd person?
- ◆ Appendices will contain maps, diagrams, raw data, *etc.*



Example structure:

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Facility description
- ◆ Process description(s)
- ◆ Waste stream description(s)
- ◆ Waste storage area description(s)
- ◆ Violations noted
- ◆ Closing conference information



Contents of Inspection Report

- ◆ Complete description of facility
- ◆ Regulatory status and compliance history
- ◆ Inspection methods
- ◆ Detailed description of sampling activities
- ◆ Compliance findings
- ◆ Information regarding “closing conference”



Things NOT to include:

- ◆ Generally don't include conclusions, especially if outside your area of expertise
- ◆ Report may contain a “findings” section.
- ◆ Never, ever say company or facility “has no violations.” Always “hedge.”



Evaluate the Report

- ◆ Proofread
- ◆ Have someone else proofread
- ◆ Check facts
- ◆ Make corrections before report is “finalized.”



Finalize the Report

- ◆ Always sign and date reports, letters, memos, and file notes.
- ◆ Label photographs
- ◆ What do you do with your notes???



What if Errors are Found after Report is Finalized?

- ◆ Acknowledge errors
- ◆ Correct significant errors as soon as possible
- ◆ Initial/date handwritten corrections on original report
- ◆ Tell anyone who might need to know



In conclusion. . .

- ◆ Your credibility may someday hang on a report you have written.
- ◆ Spelling, grammatical, and other errors often leave the reader with a poor impression of you, the writer.

SO. . .



In conclusion. . .

- ◆ Be detailed without being wordy
- ◆ Be complete without being repetitious
- ◆ Write to be understood.
- ◆ Write so you cannot be misunderstood.



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